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SUBJECT: CAPE TOWN'S "TIK"ING TIME BOMB

¶1. Summary: Cape Town is in the midst of a drug epidemic, with little relief in sight. Tik, South Africa's name for crystal methamphetamine, has emerged since about 2005 as the drug of choice for Cape Town residents, particularly from the city's ethnic "colored" community. The highly addictive drug has caused a sharp increase in criminal activity, overwhelmed the city's prevention and treatment initiatives, and thwarted municipal attempts to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic. While the Cape Town municipal government is attempting to take a multisectoral approach to addressing the problem, resource constraints appear likely to hinder its ability to respond. National legislation to curb the importation of the root chemicals used to make tik is pending and could make a dent in usage, but neither experts, city officials, nor police see much chance of a decline in the near future. Seeing as Cape Town's problems with methamphetamines mirror those of many US municipalities, US outreach and engagement with the city could bear fruit in both tackling the problem and enhancing our bilateral relationship. End summary.

THE EXPLOSION OF TIK

¶2. The emergence of tik is a very recent phenomenon in Cape Town. A 2005 Institute for Security Studies monograph written by renowned author Jonny Steinberg on drug use in the Western Cape focused its attentions on marijuana, crack cocaine, and mandrax -- a quaalude that has been popular in the area for years. He mentioned tik only once, in passing. However, the past five years have seen an explosion in use of the amphetamine, one borne out in South African Police Service (SAPS) statistics on drug-related crimes. In 2002/2003, the Western Cape had 320 drug-related cases per 100,000 people; by 2007/2008, this number had risen to 950 cases per 100,000, a number that dwarfs the national average of 2281 per 100,000. For Cape Town specifically, the 2007/2008 figure was slightly lower, at 830 per 100,000, compared to 232 in 2002/2003.

¶3. This explosion in drug crimes appears largely driven by the rise of tik. According to Cape Town municipal figures, in 2003 only 2.3 percent of people seeking drug treatment in the city of Cape Town cited tik as their primary drug of choice. By 2006, this had risen to 42 percent of those seeking treatment, including more than half of people under ¶20. Superintendent Basil Vellai of the SAPS station in the Cape Flats neighborhood of Delft -- a center of the tik epidemic -- said he has seen children as young as eight years old using the drug. Vellai told Econoff that tik is by far the most common drug in the area, and he proved it by showing Econoff the station's drug safe, which was dominated by confiscated tik.

¶4. Tik's rapid rise can be attributed in large part to its tremendously addictive nature. A new user smoking it from a pipe (note: The name "tik" comes from the sound it makes after the pipe is heated -- tik, tik, tik. End note.) will experience a rush of euphoria as the brain releases norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin. Habitual use, however, leads to obsessive behavior, violent impulses, insomnia, and anxiety. Twitchiness and tooth loss tend to be the tell-tale signs of tik addicts, while users also tend to have very high sex drives.

¶5. The relatively low cost of tik is another contributing

factor to its popularity. Vellai said tik is typically sold in quarter-lengths of drinking straws, which generally cost about R30-50 (\$3-5). This is about equivalent to a "button" of mandrax, but the mandrax provides only one hit and cannot be shared, as a straw of tik can be. Hence, a tik buyer gets Qbe shared, as a straw of tik can be. Hence, a tik buyer gets more "bang for the buck" than a mandrax user.

¶16. Tik users come from all walks of life. Children use; so do their parents. Females and males are almost equally likely to abuse the drug, according to a 2007 University of Cape Town study. While most addicts are poor, local press reports in recent months have highlighted the growing number of middle- and upper-class addicts, notably suburban "supermoms" who use tik for the energy it provides them. And while the drug is most frequently associated with Cape Town's colored community, there are black and white tik addicts as well. Rudolf Wiltshire, head of the city's Specialized Services Office -- which is specifically tasked with creating a multi-sectoral approach to tackling the problem -- told Econoff that this breadth of use makes coming up with a plan quite difficult.

----- CRIMINAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS -----

¶17. Although the numbers for drug arrests are easily measurable, the link between the rise in tik use and other crimes is less straightforward. However, Vellai notes that the addicts' needs to fuel their habits contribute specifically to robberies. Cape Town statistics suggest this link is real; reported business burglaries in Cape Town have risen from 244 per 100,000 in 2004/2005 to 289 in 2007/2008. Although statistics are less clear about the degree to which the rise of tik usage has had an impact on levels of violent crime, the local press in recent years has been full of sensationalistic reports of tik users committing brutal murders.

¶18. Tik also is strongly linked to gang activity in the colored community. According to the previously mentioned University of Cape Town study, most of the pseudoephedrine needed to make tik originates in China and is illicitly imported to South Africa via Chinese organized crime syndicates. These syndicates sell their wares to local syndicate leaders, or barter them for rare abalone shellfish, for which there is a huge market in China and the trade of which is highly regulated in South Africa. The gangs themselves then operate the distribution networks in the Cape Flats.

¶19. Vellai said gang violence in Delft ebbs and flows. Most gang leaders understand that the demand for tik means there is enough wealth to go around; generally, they demarcate territory and push their lieutenants to play by the rules. However, trouble starts when ambitious lieutenants break the rules to try to expand their reach to make more money or bolster their reputations. Vellai noted that one small section of Delft had seen over 50 murders in 2008, most of which stemmed from drug-related violence.

¶10. The social and economic impacts of tik are even more difficult to measure. A city study last year said it was impossible to measure the economic impact of tik addiction on the city (in terms of such measurable impacts as lost productivity, crime, and efforts to address the problem) but that it likely measured in the hundreds of millions of rands. Less measurable are the impacts of tik on families, many of whom have been devastated or even broken up by tik-addicted members. Wiltshire said his office last year had to set up a vagrancy unit just to deal with youths who had been displaced from their homes by the epidemic, either due to their use or the use of family members.

¶11. Tik usage also has many public health implications beyond the obvious need to treat addicts. Sarah Fisher of the organization Substance Misuse: Advocacy, Resources, and

Training (SMART), told Econoff that the lowered inhibitions and high sex drives of tik addicts -- as well as the fact many tik addicts work as prostitutes to feed their habits -- combine to frustrate government efforts to promote safe sexual practices and slow the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases, particularly HIV. Another issue of note is the problem of "tik babies," which generally have low birth weights and high risks of brain hemorrhages. Although statistics are unclear as to the cost of their care, it represents another financial burden for the local health care system.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM AN UPHILL BATTLE

¶12. The city of Cape Town is trying to address the tik epidemic through a multi-pronged approach, but finding sufficient resources looks to be a difficult task. Wiltshire told Econoff that while the city's approach to tackling tik has law enforcement, education, treatment, and public outreach components, only the first one was well established.

While the city is working closely with SAPS to go after the key drug lords and limit supply, efforts to limit demand and educate the public are nascent. Wiltshire said his office educate the public are nascent. Wiltshire said his office currently has less than ten employees; he thinks they need 20 to make any real progress. While he has been allocated the funds to hire new staff, he said finding qualified staff is difficult.

¶13. Cape Town's drug strategy has also come under fire from civil society groups focused on drug-related issues. Fisher told Econoff that the city's strategy is far too focused on law enforcement and does not adequately address education and treatment issues. Furthermore, she noted that Cape Town (and the South African government as a whole) tends to treat drug abuse as a social development issue rather than a health issue, which tends to shortchange treatment.

¶14. She was also critical of the city's inability to effectively regulate treatment centers. Presently, there are 10 registered centers in Cape Town but as many as 30 unregistered ones, many of which are fly-by-night operations that offer shoddy care. Fisher said the city needs to better regulate and expand access to these treatment centers to meet demand. She also noted that magistrates needed training as to how to refer those convicted on drug charges to treatment centers.

NATIONAL LEGISLATION COULD HELP

¶15. Tik production, according to Vellai, tends to be a small-scale operation. The police rarely uncover operations similar to the "meth labs" found in the United States. But most tik does appear to be manufactured locally, so many in the city and law enforcement believe that better regulating the importation of pseudo-ephedrine and imposing harsher penalties on illegal importation is key to the problem. The city is pushing Parliament to introduce legislation on pseudo-ephedrine; Post will follow up with parliamentary contacts after the April national election to check on the status of such a bill.

COMMENT: TIK OPENS DOOR FOR COOPERATION

¶16. Cape Town's tik problem closely mirrors the problems that many US municipalities are having with methamphetamine abuse, suggesting that opportunities for cooperation exist. City and law enforcement officials understand the degree of the problem, but they have less of a grasp in how to solve it. Hence, they most likely would benefit from building linkages with US communities that have had significant problems with methamphetamine abuse -- and successes in tackling it.

Offers to bring experts to South Africa, or South Africans to US communities, probably would be well-received by the city and help open up doors to further law enforcement cooperation.

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